

NAKED WOMEN, *The Female Nude in Photography from 1850 to the Present Day*, ed. by Phil Braham (2001, Quarto, Inc.)

(Unedited version of the "Forward" by Martha Casanave)

When most of us hear the word "Nude" (with a capital "N") we automatically see in our mind's eye naked women. And not just any naked women, but naked women belonging to a statistically insignificant segment of the female population: women of certain age, attractiveness and proportions. Most of us aren't even aware of this reflexive thinking; it happens below the radar screen of consciousness. A 1963 photograph by Diane Arbus says it all: a middle-aged nudist couple, gray-haired, overweight and soft, sits in armchairs in their modest home. On the wall between them hangs a 1950s style pin-up picture of a female figure. Here we have: two naked people and a Nude!

For this reason, whenever I begin a photography workshop on the human figure, I query the participants about their interest in this topic. Quite often I hear the following response: "I want to portray the beauty of the human body." I allow time for a dramatic silence, then I ask, "Whose body? Yours? Your wife's?... Your husband's?" The room is silent. I look around and see a field of furrowed brows.

The genre of the female nude in art is a tradition so deeply imbued in our consciousness that we aren't in the habit of questioning it. Photography itself is too new to have deeply embedded traditions; the medium acquired its pictorial conventions from painting. Female nudity has always been an acceptable theme in painting, even in religious art, but the kind of nudity--the way it was used--has always been open to controversy. In other words, the arena of the Representation of Woman has always been a battlefield. A well-known example is Edouard Manet's "Olympia" (1863) which generated negative responses when it was exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1865. Manet slightly altered the well-worn and accepted "odalisque" theme: he had his beauty reclining in the usual submissive, sexually available manner, but departing from convention, he painted her as a self-possessed individual, looking straight at the viewer. This individual's head isn't coyly tilted, isn't lolling on the pillow or resting in her arms, but is held high. This departure from convention--portraying a female nude as an individual whose gaze rivets the viewer's--was enough to cause hostility among viewers and critics. Greg Freidler's contemporary image in this book has the same combination of elements-- a relaxed , sexually available posture (but much more revealing than was acceptable in Manet's time) together with a self-possessed, "don't-mess-with-me" gaze. This kind of image might still make some viewers uneasy!

An astute observer will notice that the majority of photographs in this book were made by men. Historically, the majority of all pictures of naked women--painted and photographed-- have been made by men, for male viewers. The female nude in art has conventionally been an idealized sexually available object, to be gazed upon, desired and fantasized about by heterosexual males. Susan Sontag wrote in 1999: "The traditions regarding men as, at least potentially, the creators and curators of their own destinies and women as objects of male emotions and fantasies.....are still largely intact..." .*

The convention of what the ideal female body should look like evolves with time and clothes fashion: for example, only in the 20th century did thinness become fashionable, as well as long legs and an emphasis on feet and high-heeled shoes. Nevertheless, the male-generated ideal still pervades our consciousness --along the continuum of Hollywood, glamor, fashion, art, pornography, and advertising. This all-pervasive ideal has placed the woman artist

working with the female nude in a vague and undefined place. There is no historic precedent for her. Her stance as an artist (and viewer) is problematic; how are her images to be “read?” For example, Tracy Lee’s self-portrait conforms to the stereotype of the Sleeping Woman: a passive, unchallenging, and sexually available naked woman. Lee wants us to know, however, that this image “is not the subjective creation of a male but a carefully constructed act by a woman who is both author and subject.”

This volume contains an immense variety of images of the female nude, some of which conform to well established stereotypes, such as Woman and Water (Woman and Nature); Woman as (Sexualized) Child; the Captive Woman (Woman Bound or Wrapped); Woman Distorted; Woman as Object, the Fetishized Woman; the Sleeping Woman, Woman on Pedestal, etc. Many of these stereotypes were especially prevalent in 19th century salon painting and literature, and were therefore ripe for picking by the astonishing new form of imaging which was announced to the world in 1839.

On the other hand, many of the images in this book either do not conform to the familiar stereotypes or they jar viewers into an awareness of stereotypes by playing upon them. Larry Fink’s “Lunch” is an unusual image in a contemporary art context because it depicts the breast’s biological function, rather than its decorative, sexually alluring form. Early Italian Renaissance images of the Virgin with one exposed breast, though they might have an erotic tinge for today’s viewers, also alluded to the breast’s nourishing function. (Feeding an infant animal milk was not yet accepted practice.) It is uncommon to picture milk spurting from the breast, even though a number of paintings dating from the 13th century do show St. Bernard receiving a stream of milk expressed directly from the Virgin’s breast. Fink’s image departs further from convention in that a collecting jar is pictured instead of a nurtured infant (or a monk in religious trance). Emily Andersen’s “Jackson Twins” spoofs the stereotype of the pin-up nude: the clothed twin sits naturally, hunched in an armchair, while the naked sister poses in a stereotypical posture of display. Jan Zwart’s “Two Women” is a startling comparison of a naked woman wearing a blindfold and a woman wearing a djellaba covering everything except her eyes, prompting viewers to think not only about cultural differences but also about the overt and covert messages sent by clothes.

And what about pictures of naked old women? Most viewers of the female nude want to idealize, desire, and fantasize; they don’t want to be reminded of their own mortality. Nadav Kander’s “Irma” will make some viewers squirm, challenging their assumptions about the female nude, especially since the subject is a named individual, and also holds the viewer’s gaze.

This book testifies to one certainty: The Female Body remains a battle-site. Today’s media-conglomerates have joined the fray, perpetuating stereotypes while simultaneously seeming to encourage freedom of choice. On the other hand, feminism, postmodernism, and gay/ lesbian theory have cut the barbed wire of convention and expanded the definition of what is acceptable. Economic realities are changing women’s roles. Digital imaging, the internet, and globalization, all of which loosen boundaries of all kinds, have blurred the line between mainstream and fringe. The wired world has made possible a speedier evolution of acceptability, and also made possible a niche for almost every taste. I am eager to share this book, which runs the gamut from tradition to innovation, with my students, to encourage thought and discussion about where they will choose to stake their positions in the arena.

* Susan Sontag, “A Photograph Is Not An Opinion. Or Is It?”, *WOMEN*, Annie Leibowitz, 1999. Random House, New York.